

# Mokuaweoweo Mission: From the Sea to the Summit of Mauna Loa

Seven days, 13,679 feet of elevation gain, and 74.9 miles through Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

As a backcountry intern for Hawaii Volcanoes National Park during the summer of 2013, I had the opportunity to hike from the coastline to Mokuaweoweo, the summit caldera of Mauna Loa. My friend Emily and I set out to fully experience this special place, not to make the first nor the fastest attempt at a sea to summit ascent.

What follows are excerpts from the journal I kept on the trail, shared here in hopes of aiding and inspiring others to set out on this epic adventure. I include our distance, time, and elevation change, as well as daily route and campsite, to give a basic outline of our trip. I also note where we received water, food, and gear drops. Lastly, I share my reflections on each day's journey and what I experienced along the way. Happy trails! – Lea, HAVO Backcountry Intern 2013

Day 1, July 31: End of Ainahou Road to Keauhou, via Keauhou Trail

Distance: 7.5 miles

Time: 3.5 hours

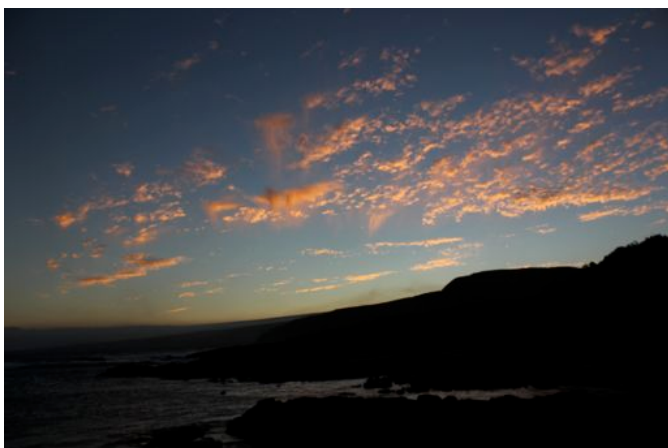
Elevation: - 2,274 ft.

Campsite: Keauhou

What a day, a day for beginning. Wind pushed us, guided us, forced us even, straight down towards the coast. Wind whipped the ocean below into whitecaps and bursts of sea spray exploding on the rocky shoreline. Whipped my hair out of a tightly woven braid and took my hat off my head. Painted the sky with long, thin brushstrokes of cirrus clouds. We guessed that we were being served the leftovers of tropical storm Flossie and wished for a kite or sail to harness the energy of the wind for ourselves.

Started late, around 2 pm from Ainahou, but enough time for a leisurely hike down to Keauhou, stopping to admire the landscape and pua kala seeds. Making time to make photographs in the beautiful long light of the afternoon.

Hard to believe that we are really doing this, what everyone else deems as crazy, but we claim as our enjoyment, this sea to summit hike. Planning and talking and dreaming of this for so long, and now we are doing it, a challenge I welcome.



A sunset fit for our beginning graced the skies tonight. Brilliantly hued scoops of sorbet scattered above a hazy edge of Mauna Loa. Sun dipped behind the mountain just as we entered the ocean for a ceremonial swim, a touching of the sea to truly begin our trip. Slipped into the ocean's calm embrace, letting it cool my skin, refreshing as always. With the fullness of the darkening sky reflected in the metallic surface of the lagoon, Keauhou was a perfect place to begin, its name meaning "a new era."



Day 2, August 1: Keauhou to Ainahou, via Keauhou Trail and Ainahou Road

Distance: 9.1 miles

Time: 5.5 hours

Elevation: + 2,946 ft.

Campsite: Off of Ainahou Road (backcountry)

Water and food dropped at the end of Ainahou Road the previous day.

First day of ascent, nine miles of constant effort required to move myself 3,000 feet up a mountain. Effort felt in gluteus maximus muscles. Effort better measured in sweat and heat and soreness of backs, not miles. Began around 8 am from Keauhou, sun already rising high overhead with hardly a cloud in the sky. Breeze blowing steadily, calmer than yesterday, but enough to have us appreciate its cooling effects. Favorite part of today: Emily and I both had the idea (reading each others minds!) to go off trail a bit to the only shade around, an ohia tree on top of a tiny lava hill. And on one side awaited a perfect chair made

of lava, a throne with a view down the coast, an oasis from the heat.

On the second long switchback up Poli o Keawe Pali, a koae bird soared right above us, backlit by the noon sun, light filtering through the edges of thin white feathers. So agile yet fragile in the updrafts of wind hitting the pali. A majestic bird to watch, it captivated me with its grace and ease of movement through a hostile environment. Got to the bottom of Ainahou at 1 pm exactly, hungry and tired and hot. Ready to stop and take a break. Turned into a three hour break, napping in the shade. I felt slightly dehydrated so I drank some electrolytes, and luckily my energy returned.

Now in the tent, staying warm and out of the chilly wind. Enjoying the company of a good friend, a much needed component of this hike. I really don't think I would want to do this alone.

Day 3, August 2: Ainahou to Namakanipaio Campground, via Ainahou Road, Chain of Craters Road, Escape Road, and Crater Rim Trail

Distance: 14.0 miles

Time: 8 hours

Elevation: +1,126 ft.

Campsite: Namakanipaio Campground

Gear (cold-weather clothes) brought to Namakani by friends.

Happy Birthday! Couldn't choose a better way to celebrate my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday than climbing mountains, learning a lot, laughing often, and loving much. Woke up to a silhouetted ohia against a sky tinted orange by sunrise, a beautiful way to greet the day I was born.

Hiked 14 miles today, at first through aalii, mamane, pukiawe, and ulei, all plants that can tolerate dry conditions. Slowly gained elevation and made our way to the rainforest. Along Escape Road, we encountered uluhe fern thick amongst ohia trees, then thinning to make way for an understory of kawau, pilo, and uki. Finally hapuu tree ferns appeared near Nahuku (Thurston lava tube), and we enjoyed the beauty of the fullness of that rainforest, so many layers loosely arranged, overlapping and lacing together to create a comforting closeness of home. Re-entered a drier climate on the Crater Rim Trail, where rainforest gave way to sparse aalii and ohelo, with our first sighting of koa trees.



All through the day, we talked as we walked, talked while we took long breaks, and enjoyed companionship on the trail. Easy grade, gained only 1,000 feet, and wide roads and trails made for a day of hiking side by side. We celebrated when we arrived at the summit of Kilauea, as mist rolled aside to reveal the uahi a Pele plume of Halemaumau.

Tonight we held a party of sorts, with friends and family gathering at Namakani to re-fuel us with the warmth of company and good Hawaiian food. Emily's mom even supplied a birthday cake and candles. The orange glow of Halemaumau just half a mile away lit up the night sky, providing another sense of warmth on this otherwise cool night.

Day 4, August 3: Namakanipaio Campground to Mauna Loa Overlook, via Mauna Loa Strip Road

Distance: 13.0 miles

Time: 8.5 hours

Elevation: +2,698 ft.

Campsite: near Mauna Loa Overlook (backcountry)

Water, food and gear dropped off for us earlier in the week. We left behind extra gear not needed at cabins (tent and sleeping pad).



Halfway there! We are on day four, right in the middle of our seven days on the trail, and halfway in terms of elevation gain and miles.

Today began with an unobstructed view of Mauna Loa, and although it seemed to be just a little hill off in the distance, in reality it is the most massive volcano in the world. Somehow making it halfway makes the summit an attainable goal, no longer feeling so crazy for attempting this trip.

As we arrived at Mauna Loa Overlook at about 4:30 this afternoon, clouds shifted to frame sweeping views of Kilauea caldera and Mauna Ulu. I asked Emily in disbelief, "were we really just down there yesterday?" It seemed too far away, like an unreasonable distance to hike, but my feet know the truth. Tired and sore, they have felt the land rising beneath them with each step, felt every shift in terrain. Yes, they say, we have really hiked that far.



We had anticipated today as the "boring day" of walking on pavement. We did not look forward to the road, a nonporous, hard surface designed for vehicle traffic, not human movement. We were pleasantly surprised then when we had a day full of things to see and do, when the day passed enjoyably. Passing through Kipuka Ki filled with massive koa, we met a friendly elepaio bird who hopped down from a tree and onto the road just a few feet in front of us. A baby elepaio in a nearby tree waited impatiently for its next meal. We pushed onward through the graveyard of ohia tree bones bleached by the sun, and koa mesic forest became scrubbiest and

scruffier as we climbed.

After sunset, we gazed at the glow of Halemaumau from thousands of feet up. Pele burning bright, stars burning too, pinpricks of light in a dark canvas of a moonless sky, all filtered through branches of koa trees.



Day 5, August 4: Mauna Loa Overlook to Puu Ulaula (Red Hill) Cabin, via Mauna Loa Trail  
Distance: 8.5 miles  
Time: 7.5 hours  
Elevation: +3,053 ft.  
Campsite: Puu Ulaula Cabin

Big yawn signals the end of a long day. Muscles are tight and my body is worn. Today, my thoughts were of challenge and overcoming and pushing through. An upset stomach after lunch made me question our sanity once again. Did I really want to keep hiking? But we made it to the cabin before 4 pm, taking our time after a late start at 9 am. Along with the sore stomach came thoughts of missing the comforts of home, and a realization of how important basic needs are to my happiness. I enjoy being away from those comforts if only to strengthen my appreciation of them when I return home.



Our world, our surroundings seem to change daily, with ever-shifting environments and landscapes. Today was no exception. Climbing into the alpine zone, clouds drifted below us as we walked over Mars red lava, through fuzzy ohia and hardy shrubs. I marveled at the naenae (a silversword relative) and nohoanu (the Hawaiian geranium) that survive, thrive, and emanate beauty in this harsh environment. The dry, cool, thin air, and sparse plant and animal life made everything seem rarified. Only the power of sunlight became magnified through the thin atmosphere. Lava absorbed solar radiation and released a baking heat from the largest rock on the planet.

Day 6, August 5: Puu Ulaula Cabin to Mauna Loa Summit Cabin, via Mauna Loa Trail  
Distance: 12.2 miles  
Time: 9.5 hours  
Elevation: +3,285 ft.  
Campsite: Mauna Loa Summit Cabin

Mauna Loa is called the long mountain for a reason, as we discovered today. It takes a long time to get to the top, 9.5 hours from Puu Ulaula Cabin, across the endless lava at an altitude that makes you pay attention to every breath. Reached Dewey Cone at 10 am, 2 hours and 4 miles of hiking behind us. Stopped for a break, and commiserated for the millionth time on our lack of salty snacks. Ran out of jerky two days ago, and our trail mix consisted of dried fruit, pumpkin seeds and health food store m&m's. Too much sugar, we decided, for too many days. So we dumped some sea salt in the mix and carried on.



Just as the hunger pains of lunchtime crept into our bellies, we spied the 12,000 foot sign. Hiking for six days straight gives you an intense appetite, we also discovered. Of course, a quick nap was also on order but soon got our bodies moving again. Rewarded with a view of the land we covered today, the east rift zone we travelled along never more apparent, lined with craters and cinder cones as far as my eye could see. Reds and blacks and browns, the colors of the day, became intense in their isolation. We couldn't help but think of Mordor, that mythical Lord of the Rings locale, or Mars. Some other world, definitely, we visited today.



Finally, our first sight of Mokuaweoweo, the caldera walls glowing red in the afternoon light. Felt no signs of altitude sickness, felt relatively well given the activity of the past 6 days. Until we hiked the last 2.1 miles to the cabin. The longest, hardest trail in the park, an uphill battle above 13,000 feet. Body craved oxygen, intense sunlight beamed at an angle that no hat could shield. The terrain was constantly uneven and unsteady. The only way to describe our arrival at the cabin: a delirious mix of euphoria and madness, nearly collapsing on the

ground in a puddle of irrational tears. But we made it, as we always do, and I look forward to a good night's rest.

Day 7, August 6: Mauna Loa Summit Cabin to Mauna Loa Observatory (including side trip to the true summit of Mauna Loa) via Mauna Loa Trail, Summit Trail, and Observatory Trail

Distance: 10.6 miles

Time: 5.5 hours

Elevation: +571, -2,000 (estimate)

Campsite: None (Home sweet home!)

Mokuaweoweo Mission complete! Reached the true summit after dropping our packs at the junction with the observatory trail, still took a concentrated effort to hike the 5 miles roundtrip above 13,000 ft. Offered our hookupu of oli and puolo filled with pieces of the wao (regions) we passed through on our journey from kahakai to kuahiwi. Summits of Mauna Kea, Hualalai, and Haleakala floated above puffy cloud tops to the Northwest. The view itself transported us to another realm, and I no longer felt entirely rooted to planet earth. I came upon a new understanding of the sacredness of summits. We offered our oli to the whole world spread out below us, to all the wao we passed through and all the inhabitants of those realms: plants and animals, humans and minerals, winds and water. It is an overwhelming feeling, being at once in the sky and on the earth, feeling the monumental girth and solid massiveness of land beneath my feet alongside the lightness and freedom of the air above my head. Emotions welled up when we thought of the long journey to where we stood, all the amazing experiences, all the sweat and hard work. Finally, we made it! Accomplishment, success, and gratitude for reaching the summit filled our hearts.



As always, it's about the journey, not the destination. The whole time I kept asking myself, "Why are we doing this? Are we really crazy?" Finally I found the answers. No, we are not crazy, and this is why we did it: We did it to challenge ourselves, physically and mentally. To learn about our place, our land, through first-hand experience. To travel at human speed, a pace at which our brains can absorb and appreciate all that our senses feed us. To stop and admire a particularly lush ohelo bush, dripping with ready-to-burst berries. To meet the elepaio and its chick, and to watch as receding clouds reveal sweeping views of Kilauea, from the uahi a Pele in Halemaumau to Puu Oo. To gaze down the east rift zone of Mauna Loa, to recall the beauty of the ocean we had not touched in days. To feel strength in the distance we had traveled, to feel anticipation for what lay ahead. Why did we set out on this mission, what was the goal? Not simply to reach the summit, but to better understand ourselves, our world, and our place in it. Mission accomplished without a doubt.



"Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it." – Goethe.